

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Geir Farner, *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2014)

Geir Farner's *Literary Fiction: The Ways We Read Narrative Literature* offers a cognitive model for reading and interpreting literature. This model breaks traditional elements of fiction, such as message, structure, and voice, into a précised discussion of how we interpret these elements and their overall effects on the text, arguing that the 'interaction between reader and text plays an indispensable role' in literary communication (42). The six-page table of contents makes the text easy to navigate, which may be ideal for literature teachers and students to focus on particular elements; however, the book develops these throughout, and some sections rely on Farner's discussions in previous sections for the nuances of his argument to be patent.

Early in the book, Farner outlines a number of methodological frameworks that outline what makes fiction *fiction* – which sounds an easier task than it is. By addressing a range of theorists from Aristotle to Hayden White, and considering the incorporation of factual elements into fiction, he encapsulates a breadth of arguments in his discussion. He reaches the conclusion that the greatest difference between fiction and non-fiction is in the intention of the author – or 'sender', in Farner's terms – to be loyal to the truth, and that 'fictional texts do not purport to render facts in a comparable way, because the only link between fiction and reality is indirect and consists in likeness' (23). He draws on structuralist and formalist literary theory regarding modes of reading, and critiques some of the dominant theories of genre for their limitations when extended to fiction.

He asserts that all the information we are given about a text is that which is in the text itself, and '[b]ecause the text comes into existence simultaneously with narration, it is part of the narrative act and at the same time a result of it, as the only testimony of the finished narrative process' (33). Thus, the interplay between the discourse of the text and the reader is the 'only testimony of the finished narrative process' (33). The information that has been imparted to us has been filtered by the author, and therefore the way in which we interpret the actions in fictional texts is necessarily biased by the author (42). Farner critiques theories that fictional truth is 'only a question of linguistic perception based on rhetoric' (43).

Farner's cognitive model necessitates an acceptance of the subjectivity of the 'mental' processes and imagination of the reader in their interpretation as distinct from the 'real world', to which a non-fiction text would refer (37-38). His understanding of literature of mimetic necessitates that '[t]he fictional world is constructed according to the same pattern as the real world and resembles it. On account of this likeness, the fictional events shed useful light on the general structure in the real world' (40). The primary function of literary communication, for Farner, is 'giving insight into the problems of the real world and their possible solutions' (286) and he asserts that '[t]he reason fictional characters and events evoke such strong emotions is that we regard them as representative of our own real world' (289). He discusses the pleasure of reading as well, and that readers may not be aware that they are learning, but '[u]nconsciously he [sic] wants the cognitive influence' (291); he thus asserts that 'literature with no cognitive functions should not be termed literature at all' (295). The extent to which I accept such comments is limited, but Farner offers a reasonable explanation for his logic in 'The Functions of Literary Fiction' (Chapter 15).

The later chapters focus the 'mental model' of the text. Farner's mental model is the particular framework of the story's action interpreted as a 'coherent whole' (66) that occurs in fiction, and the elements that are 'imposed on the action's own structure without changing it' (61). This model accounts for the way in which we can think about the action of the story as detached from the text itself, showing that the text is simply a vehicle. The author's deliberate 'Selection' (Chapter 9) of

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textual elements, such as voice (Chapter 10), viewpoint or focalization (Chapter 11), frequency (Chapter 12) and order (Chapter 13), mean that a narrative will have particular limitations that impact on the reader's reactions to the text; while these are elements that must be interpreted by the reader, the reader cannot interpret that which is not within the text, and thus the author's framing of the action of the text through these elements alters the extent to which the action is open to the reader's interpretation. Such a framework allows for simultaneous acknowledgement of the importance of the author's role as well as the reader's subjective interpretation.

Literary Fiction is comprehensive in its analysis of other forms of literary theory, and Farner's concise yet informative summations of formalism, structuralism, genre theory and aestheticism are useful on their own as an overview of the differing theoretical viewpoints. While, at times, his assertions sit uncomfortably beside the poststructuralist and postmodern modes of analysis that remain prevalent in literary criticism – which he amusingly acknowledges through his statement that despite the diversity of literary scholarship, it ultimately 'does not matter what solution we opt for, for there are no consequences: no bridges collapse, nobody dies, and the lack of consensus affects neither the ozone layer nor the Gulf Stream' (333) – Farner's own theory is one which forces a reconsideration of the communication process of the text and the ways in which we read.

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